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Where Spies Are Superstars

Understandably enough, the Walker spy scandal is an occasion for American self-examination and self-criticism. The revelations are being pondered for what they say about how democracy sometimes allows human venality to thrive and vital state secrets to perish. But there is another lesson in the whole shocking sordid affair. It is a reminder that spying comes naturally to the Soviet Union in a way that is difficult for Americans to understand.

For most in the West, notably including political leaders, spying is deemed necessary largely because everyone does it, but it is relegated to the shadowy sidelines of the more legitimate enterprises of diplomacy and soldiering. Opening each other's mail is a business gentlemen pursue only with a certain self-conscious distaste.

Even in fiction, espionage is treated as the dirty little secret of modern international politics. James Bond is good escapist fun, but the world of John le Carré is recognized as the real thing. The bookish, perpetually cuckolded George Smiley is not a hero because he champions Western civilization; rather, he is the melancholy rationalist, penetrating the ingenuity of other people's deceit. He is more honest, and braver in his honesty, than his colleagues. Yes, he fights Karla, his

Soviet counterpart, but Smiley also does battle against the corruption of his own organization and society.

No such dark brooding is in order in the Soviet Union. Spies are good guys, pure and simple, as long as they are on the Soviet side. Even in czarist times, secret agents were regarded as legitimate and indispensable protectors of a sprawling empire that was surrounded by hostile forces and infested with political malcontents and agitators. Backward in so many other respects, Russia was precocious in developing a police apparatus. That institution was ready-made for the Bolsheviks, with their militant ideology and their conspiratorial, secretive methods. According to Marxism-Leninism, politics is a continuation of war by other means. Spies are in the front line of that war.



Rudolf Abel being arraigned in 1957

The concept of the security of the Soviet state is sacrosanct in a way roughly comparable to the concept of personal freedom in the West. In Russian, security is *bezopasnost*—the B in KGB. The word literally means "the absence of danger." As a profes-

sion, security means vigorously identifying and, whenever possible, eliminating danger.

Hence, in the Soviet Union, the mentality of the spy is part and parcel of the mentality of the commissar and, beyond that, of the citizen. The relationship between an agent and his source, between a secret policeman and his informer, is not only an honorable estate but an essential one.

Secret agents, once their work is done, are lionized in the U.S.S.R. Richard Sorge, a German who spied for Joseph Stalin in Japan during World War II, is honored on a postage stamp. Rudolf Abel, one of the most notorious Soviet agents of the '50s, was awarded the Order of Lenin after he was traded for U-2 Pilot Francis Gary Powers in 1962. KGB anniversaries are occasions for rallies and testimonials. "The competent organs," a common euphemism for the intelligence services, make up a kind of superelite. For years it was a basic tenet of Kremlinological wisdom that the head of the KGB was too much distrusted by his comrades ever to become General Secretary of the party. Yuri Andropov disproved that rule of thumb in 1982. He personified the Soviet obsession with security and reverence for the guardians of security.

Anyone caught spying against the Soviet Union is worse than an enemy and deserving of a fate worse than mere execution. After Oleg Penkovsky, a colone in military intelligence, was discovered to be working for the CIA in 1962, he was put to death. The assumption at the time was that he had been shot. Subsequently, however, it was reported that in fact he was hurled alive into a crematorium furnace. Thus, there is a brutal converse of the Soviet Union's adulation of spies who serve its cause around the world.

—By Strobe Talbot